

7-1-1976

Was There An American Revolution? A Look at 1776

Michael R. Winston

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

Recommended Citation

Winston, Michael R. (1976) "Was There An American Revolution? A Look at 1776," *New Directions*: Vol. 3: Iss. 3, Article 8.
Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol3/iss3/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact lopez.matthews@howard.edu.

When George Washington crossed the Delaware,
there was a Black man on that boat. In this engraving,
he is seen at the left end of the boat pulling an oar.



Was There An American Revolution?

A Look at 1776

By Michael R. Winston

During this Bicentennial Year, in addition to the tons of red, white and blue trinkets hawked for the instant patriots; fake colonial shopping center facades, and elaborately staged battle pageants, the public is being bombarded by oratory swollen with predictable phrases about the virtues of the American Revolution. The term American Revolution has been repeated so often, with so little thought or qualification, that the public has simply become numb, and a vague phrase has assumed a substantive reality, though it is admittedly so malleable that radicals, moderates and conservatives can all refer for their own purposes to the American Revolution.

Let us examine the concept of the American Revolution from two related but analytically distinct points of view. For too long professional historians in the United States, with few exceptions, have supposed that the experience of the American colonists between 1763 and 1789 was so distinctive that it could not be validly compared with the preceding English revolutions of the 17th century, or the contemporaneous and succeeding revolutions in France, Haiti, or Russia. Despite this long tradition of scholarship reinforced by a parochial frame of mind, it is increasingly clear that study of these revolutions is helpful in arriving at objective criteria for determining what is, and what

is not revolutionary. It can hardly be maintained that if a nationalist group simply proclaims itself as revolutionary that will be sufficient ground for so considering it.

Therefore, it is necessary to sketch briefly the elements of a definition based on historical experience broader than the United States, and offer my own perhaps eccentric answer to the question: Was there an American revolution? The other point of view concerning this question is substantially different. The first is universalistic, perhaps cosmopolitan; its goal is objective analysis. The second is clearly more subjective, but its goal is truth, whose full meaning is beyond the analytical categories connoted by the terms "objectivity" and "subjectivity." In this connection, it is useful to recall John Stuart Mill's penetrating observation in his essay *On Liberty*:

Not the violent conflict between parts of the truth, but the quiet suppression of half of it is the formidable evil; there is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides; it is when they attend only to one that errors harden into prejudices, and truth itself ceases to have the effect of truth, by being exaggerated into falsehood.

It is not necessary to belabor the reader with the application of this observation to American history—the "great suppression" of that half of the truth in American history related to Blacks is by now too obvious to require detailed demonstration



on this occasion. But this "half of the truth" in history is not a separate "but equal" *Jim Crow half*. It is embedded throughout the dense, variegated texture of American experience, the emergence of a new nationality, a new culture, and unique ideals in the New World. The issue was placed in perspective a generation ago by the late Grand Exalted Ruler of the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World, J. Finley Wilson, who said in his book on John Brown:

I am an American. My continental ancestors were here before Christopher Columbus came to San Salvador. My progenitors were with Columbus and Pietro Alonzo on the Hispaniola, the Nina and the Pinta. My African ancestors arrived in Jamestown in 1619 before the Pilgrims came to Plymouth . . . before the Puritans came to Salem . . . before the Virginians first met in legislative assembly . . . Before the New England Confederation was formed. My folk were the people whose labor made this nation a World Power. They earned more than mere Freedom as persons of color, by 250 years of unrequited toil. They fought in every war upon this continent . . . and became citizens through civil strife wherein they played a gallant part.¹

Let me now respond to the question, "Was there an American Revolution?," simultaneously from the "outsider" position of the social scientist as well as the position of an insider, an "unhyphenated" American.

What is a Revolution?

In order to deal critically with this question, it is necessary to establish, at least for the sake of argument, what are the characteristics of a revolution. This is not to deny the obvious truth that all historical events are unique, that a proper understanding of their causes and consequences must follow from a study of particular facts rather than theoretical generalizations. While conceding this, it is nonetheless true that the concept of revolution is normative in some degree.

The term revolution surely stands for more than public agitation, vehement slogans denouncing the present system, temporary violence, scattered disturbances, general discontent, or a change in the hands holding the reins of power.

To establish the normative meaning of the term revolution, it is useful to indicate briefly the basic typology that recent social science research has applied to the broad range and differing degree of political upheaval that has at various times been called insurrection, rebellion, or revolution. It should be borne in mind that these classifications are attempts to divide these phenomena, in a manner analogous to the life sciences' taxonomic table, from the top (where "life" would be) of *social behavior*, to the genus *systemic change*, descending to the phyla of violent *political upheaval*, the level at which revolution can be classified. Carrying the analogy further, it is unnecessary at this stage to be species-specific in identifying all of the varieties of political and social behavior comprehended within the phyla.² The common basis for making the distinctions is the identification of the goals and targets of the movement. What does it wish to establish, and what group in society is projected as the opposition? It is useful here to distinguish between *government* as that complex of administrative and political institutions that executes policy decisions; *regime* as the organizational matrix of political power, e.g. a monarchy, democracy, or dictatorship; *community* as that part of the society with a developed sense of kinship, a consciousness of loyalties which may relate to class, status group, or in some historical contexts, tribes and clans.³

Chalmers Johnson, a political scientist at the University of California (Berkeley) has developed a useful typology of revolutionary change—which I have modified so that it includes the following five classifications:

1. The Jacquerie is a mass rebellion of peasants with the limited goals of restoring rights lost to the upper orders or rural

society or the removal of specific injustices and grievances. Thus the Jacquerie—the first which gave its name to the form took place in France in 1358—are rebellions rather than revolutions. The goal is simply purification of the local regime rather than a basic structural change.

2. The Millenarian Rebellion is a quasi religious mass movement with a clearly articulated vision of a new utopian world which is expected to sweep away the old regime almost spontaneously after the faithful have been mobilized by the charismatic millenarian leader. Such movements have been especially common in the non-European world and isolated pockets of poverty in Europe. Examples would be Antonio Conselheiro's movement in Bahia, Brazil, (1896-1897); Davide Lazzaretti, the "Messiah of Monte Amiata" in Southern Tuscany (1875-1878); the Taiping Rebellion in China (1851-1864) or John Chilembwe's rebellion in the Shire Highlands of Nyasaland (1915). The target of such movements is the society at large, a transformation that is *metapolitical* and therefore unspecific as to particular changes.

3. The Anarchistic Rebellion develops out of rural frustration produced by rapid industrial change that alters the social power balance between the urban bourgeoisie and the rural gentry and their dependent peasants. Historically, anarchistic rebellions are anti-nationalist and nostalgic for a past irrecoverably lost to change. Examples of this phenomenon are the rising of the Vendée in 1793 and the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900. The goal of such movements is a change in *government policy* in order to restore the pre-industrial order.

4. Militarized Mass Revolutions are nationalist movements based on a mutually re-inforcing relationship between the masses and an army. This usually develops out of protracted political struggle in which the goal of the revolutionaries is replacement of the regime in order to create a new society. The clearest examples of this in modern history are the

militarized revolutions in Yugoslavia, Malaya, China, Algeria and Vietnam.

5. The Jacobin or Communist Revolution is a nationalistic movement led by an elite who change the *regime* fundamentally (from monarchy to republic for example) and seek to transform the society through manipulation of the administrative instruments of government. An ideology representing a new value system becomes the intellectual and even emotional framework for determining the future direction of social and economic change. In these revolutions, politics becomes a means to the end of social reorganization. Examples of this, the best known type of revolution, include the French Revolution, (1789-1799); the Turkish Revolution, (1908-1922); the Mexican Revolution, (1910-1932); and the Russian Revolution of March, 1917. (The Bolshevik Revolution of October, 1917 is by technique and structure classifiable as a revolutionary *coup d'etat* by a conspiratorial party).

From this admittedly simplified analysis, it is possible to derive at least a residual definition of a revolution. From the examples cited, it may be concluded that in the modern world—that is, since the 17th century—a fully achieved, or “total” revolution includes: a fundamental change in the political regime; a basic modification of the governmental institutions that execute public policy; a restructuring of the social order in accordance with an ideology; a readjustment of economic life producing a new configuration of land tenure, control of various kinds of property and the productive forces of the society; and, a new system of secular values that makes the process of revolutionary change comprehensible and serve to reintegrate the social fractures produced by the violent destruction of the old social order. Now, keeping in mind this ideal type (in the Weberian sense) it is possible to present some of the salient characteristics of the crisis of the American colonies between 1763 and 1789 and arrive at an answer to the question, was there an American Revolution?

The American Crisis

Great historical changes require time for developments which are latent to reach maturity and be generally recognized. Even when events appear to erupt with unpredictable suddenness, calm analysis undertaken years after the urgency and immediacy of the issues have subsided, usually reveals a gradual, almost imperceptible series of small changes that combine, and metamorphose into a new entity greater than the sum of its parts. So it was for the American crisis, which was not a matter of a sudden eruption in 1776, but a tangle of events that stretched over a period of no less than 25 years. For analytical purposes, the *crisis* may be divided conveniently into three distinct stages:

I. An acrimonious struggle between 1763 and 1775 over issues related to British legal and administrative control of trade.

II. An intermittent war for independence following the Battles of Lexington and Concord, April 19, 1775 and lasting militarily until the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown, October 19, 1781, and technically until the Peace of Paris, September 3, 1783.

III. The critical period of political and economic and social experimentation, from 1781, when the Articles of Confederation went into effect, until the signing of the Constitution on September 17, 1787 by the Delegates of the Constitutional Convention (ratified by the required majority of states, nine, in June, 1788).

The popular mind conceives of all of these events as forming a single reality called the American Revolution. This convention has been transmitted to the historiography of the era, but professional historians differ considerably on precisely what specifically was revolutionary about the American Revolution. From the same established historical facts, contradictory judgments have been made. Let us examine the general issues in this debate. On the conservative side there is a tendency to argue that the American patriots were

conservatives who were trying to do no more than defend the colonies against novel and, by implication, unjust impositions by the British government. Parliament's exasperation with the systematic evasion of the Molasses Act of 1733 by American smugglers was intensified by the need to raise revenue after the disastrous costs of the seven years' war (1756-1763). The colonial American Merchant propensity to seek a profit during Britain's costly, titantic struggle with France and her continental allies by trading with Britain's mortal enemies led to the issuance of *Writs of Assistance*, general search warrants. These were denounced by the colonists as violative of the fundamental rights guaranteed to Englishmen.

Conservative American historians tend to understate the cause of the British action and to state baldly that the American patriots were only trying to restore the ancient rights of Englishmen destroyed by the exigencies of the numerous wars of the 18th century. The American patriots, in this view, were *not* revolutionary, projecting new rights or a new society. They were only attempting to restore what had been lost. The Sugar Act (1764), the Stamp Act (1765) and the Townshend Acts (1767) known to generations of American students, tend to be viewed as despotic. The crisis is seen as a conflict between an intransigent, even “tyrannous” British government, and a moderately libertarian colonial movement that sought revolutionary changes.⁶ This view became especially popular in the 1950s when all revolutions, including one in 18th century America, were sources of ill-concealed anxiety. It was important to dissociate, as much as possible, the American political system from origins that could be construed as being as revolutionary in principle as revolutionary movements of the 20th century.

On the other hand, some historians and intellectuals of what in America is called “liberal” political view, have emphasized the Libertarian, Jeffersonian, Republican tradition that may be extracted selectively from the same ample mine of facts, tend-

The Stamp Act of 1765—a British revenue measure which taxed the colonists for newspapers, licenses, legal documents, even dice and cards—resulted in the public burning of stamps in Boston and universal refusal to use them.

22



ing to understate the restrictive, Adams, Hamiltonian, and Federalist side of this genuinely complex period. The historical development is always ambiguous and contradictory. How, then, can one unravel the strands of fact to arrive at a balanced judgment?

A first step is to look quickly at what contemporaries thought of the events and how they took sides on the issues. As the comparative historian R. R. Palmer has pointed out, "No one in 1776, whether for it or against it, doubted that a revolution was being attempted in America."⁷ The subsequent French Revolution gave a new meaning and definition to the concept of revolution, and John Adams and other Federalists wished to be distinguished from what they considered the revolutionary excesses of Paris.

A fragment of evidence suggesting what at least some rebellious Americans thought they were doing in the 1770s and 1780s is as close as a dollar bill. Notice that on the obverse is the Great Seal of the United States claiming the Almighty's approval of what must be interpreted as revolution: *Annu't Coeptis*, from book IX (625) of Virgil's *Aeneid*: "He has favored our undertakings." The undertakings are comprehended in the phrase at the base of the mystical pyramid bearing the date 1776: *Novus Ordo Seclorum*: "A new order of the ages." One can scarcely proceed, however, from a revolutionary symbol to the hasty conclusion that the crisis was in fact a revolution in any precise or strict use of the term. This can be achieved only by a scrutiny, admittedly too brief here to be conclusive, of the theory and practice of the founders of the American republic, considered in the comparative and theoretical framework outlined earlier.

It is not necessary to describe in detail the theory of the American rebels. The most sweeping, revolutionary aspect of it is embodied in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with cer-*₅

tain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

There lies the heart of what was a new political conception in the modern world. Based on the assertion of natural equality, governments derive their sovereignty from the constituent power of the people, and governments are established to secure natural rights, produce safety and human happiness: When governments fail to achieve these ends it is the inherent right of the people to destroy the government and create a new political order. That doctrine was revolutionary then, and now, but it is only by examining the *application* of The Revolutionary Doctrine to the actual circumstances of the critical period 1781 a 1787 that a sound answer can be found to the elusive question being pursued here. The application of course is revealed institutionally in the more sober and precise provisions of the Constitution.

Equally revealing is the way the founders of the republic faced the key issue of colonial society, the future of the institution of slavery, for no other matter was more fundamentally at odds with the values explicitly enunciated in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence.

On the first point it is important to observe that the leaders of the Constitutional Convention generally agreed with John Adams that the high task of practical governance was the achievement of a balance between the contending forces in society. The conflicts were derived from what Adams regarded as permanent divisions between rich and poor, the well-

born and educated as against the common laborer. Mutual antipathy and suspicion had to be kept in an equilibrium that would permit the superior orders of society, a permanent and unchanging minority, to rule. Adams could not go as far as Hamilton, who believed the "rich and well-born" were the natural guardians of good government. He was more penetrating in his analysis of human nature and thought that the rich had to be kept in check as much as the poor: Inadequate restraints would result in the rich crushing the liberties of the poor, or the poor despoiling the rich.

As the late Howard University Professor of Economics, Abram L. Harris, pointed out a generation ago, both the Federalists—led by Hamilton—and the Republicans—led by Jefferson—held the same basic assumptions that property must take precedence over rights. The source of their disagreement was on the issue of the *kind* of property on which political power should rest. "The Republicans," he wrote, "thought that it should rest on the small landed proprietors. The Federalists maintained that it should rest on mobile property, the wealth of the moneyed interests. These right and left-wing champions of American democracy . . . did not represent different classes but rather different fractions of the propertied class."⁸

The fundamental assumption of the makers of the constitution was that stability could be secured only by developing restraints to any leveling tendency in society. Vernon L. Parrington summarized the inherent conflict between the revolutionary theory and conservative practice as follows:

"Although the new constitution professed to rest on the sovereignty of the people, the men who framed it refused to interpret the term, sovereignty of the people, in an equalitarian sense. They did not profess to be, in the words of John Quincy Adams, 'slavish adorers of our sovereign lords the people.' Every principle of their social and political philosophy taught them the desirability of limiting

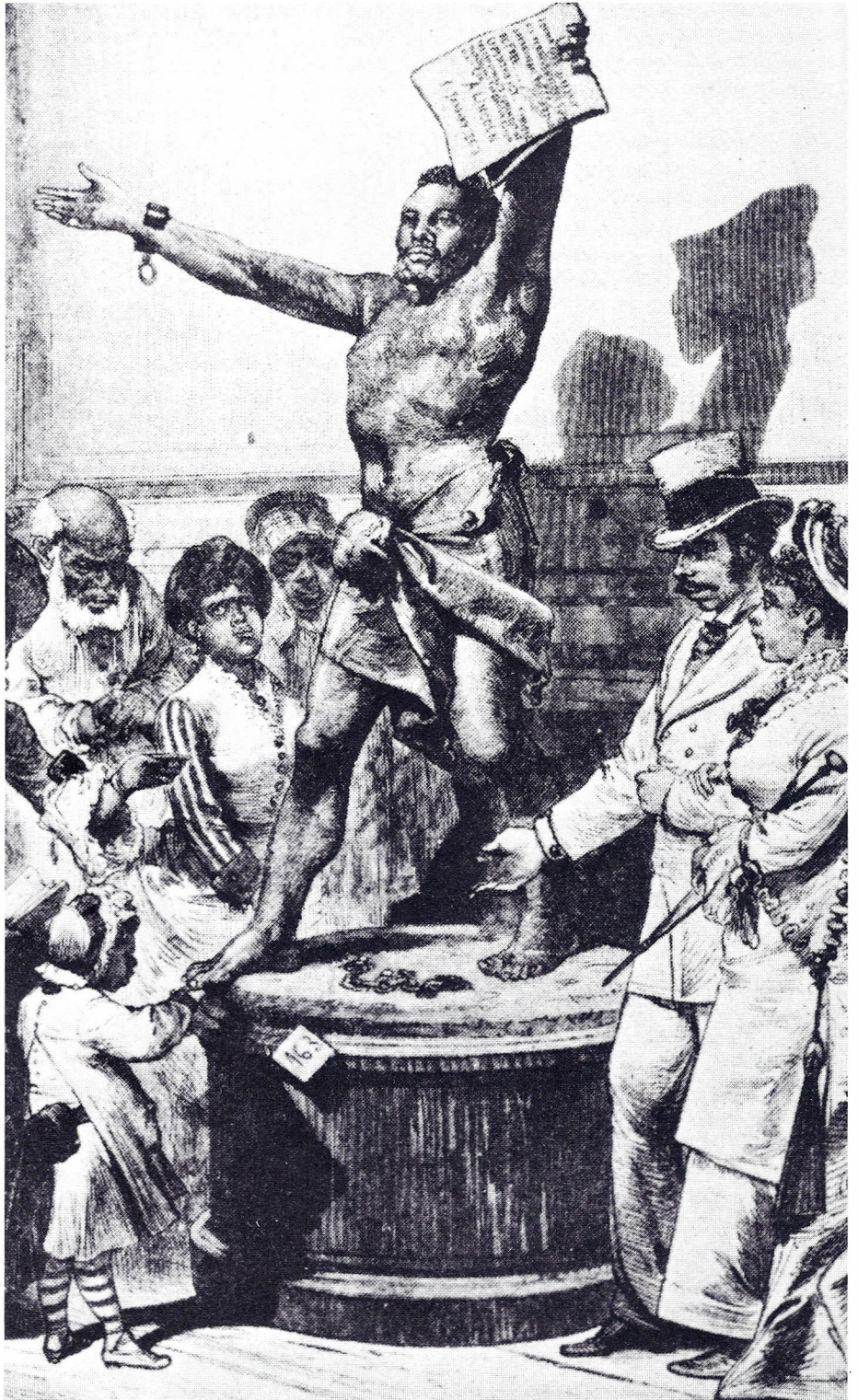
the majority will in order that the wiser minority will might rule."⁹

The most obvious conflict between theoretical ideals and practice, of course, was the fundamental incompatibility in a democratic system of small farmers on one hand, and slaveholding aristocrats on the other. In the North, some colonists objected to the insistent demand for freedom for themselves but slavery for others. In 1776 there were 500,000 slaves out of a population of 2,500,000. The Baptist preacher, John Allen of Massachusetts, asked his compatriots: "What is a trifling three-penny duty on tea compared to the inestimable blessings of liberty to one captive?"¹⁰ In his pamphlet *The Watchman's Alarm* (1774), Allen chided the would-be revolutionaries:

*Blush ye pretended votaries for freedom! Ye trifling patriots! Who are making a vain parade of being advocates for the liberties of mankind, who are thus making a mockery of your profession by trampling on the sacred natural rights and privileges of Africans; for while you are fasting, praying, non-importing, nonexporting, remonstrating, resolving and pleading for a restoration of your charter rights, you at the same time are continuing this lawless, cruel, inhuman, and abominable practice of enslaving your fellow creatures."*¹¹

While Patrick Henry of Virginia could declare, "give me liberty, or give me death!", he refused to consider freeing his own slaves.¹² He said it would be "inconvenient." Despite the liberal theories of the leading Virginia aristocrats, generous theories of liberty and humane principles were shattered on the granite realities of selfish interests and the concept of the sacredness of property. For here the issue was joined. What took precedence, the theory of the rights of man, or the inviolability of property? It was fateful for American society that a critical mass of patriot leadership came from colonies whose economies were rooted in plantation slavery. The leading slave state, Virginia, had 200,000 slaves in 1776; South Caro-

Statue of the "Freed Slave" at the Centennial Exposition.



lina, 100,000; Maryland and North Carolina, 80,000 each.

It is not difficult to recognize, therefore, the dimensions of the obstacles to abolition in the years between 1776 and 1787. And it should not be forgotten that while fewer in number, the slaves of the North were not a negligible group in 1776, with as many as 25,000 in New York, and between 5,000 and 10,000 each in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

It is clear, therefore, that the colonies reached a turning point—and failed to turn. That failure would make emancipation in the succeeding century so difficult as to require nothing less than a bloody civil war and fundamental changes in the Constitution. Historians have tended to understate the significance of this failure by apologetics based on exaggerated alleged difficulties of 18th century abolition.

When one compares the action of the nearly contemporaneous French Revolution, the degree to which the American crisis with Britain fell short of fundamental social change is brought into relief. France emancipated slaves while America saw slavery strengthened as an institution as a result of the British industrial revolution's enormous and profitable demand for cotton after the turn of the 19th century. This enlarged, protected and expanding slave system was a blight on national development. It shaped the fundamental contours of American culture and character—its legacy of racism, waste of human talent, and organized hatreds is still a livid scar in American society.

It can now be concluded that the American Revolution was essentially a political movement. It was a nationalistic insurrection aimed at independence—an American war for independence. The radical element in the political change was in the theory of the constituent power of the people. The most characteristic feature of modern revolutions, fundamental social change ensuing from a change in the regime, was missing. The chief obstacle to such change was the determination of

some of the most important leaders of the independence movement to maintain slavery. For these reasons, there was only a partial revolution in America in the 18th century.

The framers of the Constitution, however, provided the most enduring instrument of governance known to the modern world—despite the stigmata which reveal its origins in a slave society, such as the original three-fifths clause of Article I, Section 2.

Similarly, the ideals generated by the independence struggle, despite the society's failure to bring its practices into congruence with them, continue to be a great heritage. Perhaps it is fair to conclude that the real American Revolution will be achieved when Mr. Jefferson's self-evident truths can be made a reality by citizens with the courage to apply them to American conditions. □

Michael R. Winston, Ph.D., is director of the Moorland-Spangarn Research Center at Howard University. This article was excerpted from an address he delivered at Lincoln University (Pa.).

REFERENCE

1. William C. Hueston and J. Finley Wilson, editors, *The John Brown Reader* (Washington, D.C., 1949), p. 83.
2. The suggestive taxonomic approach, which I have modified, is found in Chalmers Johnson, *Revolution and The Social System* (Stanford, California, 1964), pp. 26-27.
3. See David Easton, "Political Anthropology" in B. J. Siegel, editor, *Biennial Review of Anthropology* (Stanford, 1959), pp. 228-229.
4. Johnson, *op cit.*, pp. 31-68. I depart from Johnson's model at several critical points: the inclusion of *coups d'état* is unsound in my judgment since they represent a technique rather than a movement; the same confusion develops from using the term "Militarized Mass Insurrection" and apply it to the Chinese Revolution. See also, George Pettie, "Revolution—Typology and Process" in *Revolution*, edited by Carl J. Friedrich (NOMOS), *Revolution*, edited by Carl J. Friedrich (NOMOS VIII—Yearbook of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy); New York, 1969, pp. 10-33.
5. For representative definitions of "total" revolution see Sigmund Neumann, "The International Civil War," *World Politics* (April, 1949), pp. 333-334; Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan (London, 1962), p. 274; and Alfred Meusel, "revolution and counter revolution" *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (volume 13), p. 368.

6. See Clinton Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic: The Origin of the American Tradition of Political Liberty* (New York, 1953), pp. 352-356.

7. R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, vol. I, (Princeton, 1959), p. 187.

8. Abram L. Harris "The Economics of the Founding Fathers" *Harpers* (November, 1937), p. 651.

9. Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* Vol I, *The Colonial Mind* (New York, 1927), p. 287.

10. Quoted in Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967), p. 241.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

12. See Samuel Eliot Morrison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York, 1936), p. 126.